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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ADANA 000149

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [ADANA](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM STILL MIXED IN SE TURKEY

REF: A. A) RSO ANKARA/DSERRC NOTE NOV 3

[B](#). A)REF: RSO ANKARA/DSERRC NOTE NOV. 3

[C](#). A) RSO ANKARA DSERRC NOTE NOV 3 B) ADANA 000128

[D](#). ADANA 000128

1.(SBU) Summary: The situation for the Christian community in southeast Turkey remains mixed. Christian contacts in Diyarbakir, Hatay, Mersin and Adana report a generally positive to neutral atmosphere in relations with local officials, but a continuing atmosphere of official suspicion and occasional acts of violence perpetrated by individual police members. Recent events in Gaziantep (refnotice and septel) indicate continuing harassment of Christians in that city. End Summary.

Improving zoning for Diyarbakir Church ?

2.(SBU) During a late October visit with PO, Pastor Ahmet Guvener of the protestant-affiliated Diyarbakir Church said that he expected that the church would soon have its zoning obstacles lifted. He said that he had heard this news from "authoritative Turkish ministry sources in Ankara in the last few days," but still lacked any documents to substantiate the promise. He was encouraged by the news, as was an American religious worker who assists him. As of November 22, Guvener remained optimistic about a permanent one based on both verbal assurances and intermediate zoning decisions offered by lower level government review committees in early November, but said that "really permanent changes now would not be final until January 2005."

3.(SBU) Should the zoning ordinance obstacles be lifted, they anticipated remodeling their sanctuary's interior to reflect a more traditional worship area by removing artificially placed partitions earlier built to comply with Diyarbakir city zoning board direction. They also hoped to buy a small lot nearby the church to build a children's park for community children. They said that doing so would entail being allowed to receive foreign donations to fund the purchase. They said that city municipal leaders, in contrast to earlier national government resistance, had offered them support-in-kind for the park's construction once the church could acquire the property.

Adana Christians still surviving, but not thriving

4.(SBU) The Adana-based Cukurova Christian Council's leader, who represents a collection of several hundred evangelical protestant Christians, said that the region's "new Christian" community generally was prospering, but still encountered official suspicion and formal questioning short of outright harassment and occasional individual police violence. He noted that there is no actual church building in the Cukurova area, but that gatherings of Christians in homes in number up to 30-40 each were known to authorities and had not experienced any systematic resistance or zoning challenges in Adana or Tarsus. Efforts to build a church in Mersin have been blocked thus far by zoning challenges, he said, but the effort to gain official zoning approval was ongoing. He noted that the community just started a FM radio Christian broadcast reaching Adana, Mersin and Tarsus and that Adana police had summoned him last week to their offices to question him about its funding and the "role of foreigners in supporting it. He said that he told that it was partly dependent on foreign funding, had material from Hope Broadcasting and a Republic of Korea programming source and had both Turkish and foreign funding. He said that he did not feel harassed and that the police did not threaten him or the radio broadcast.

5.(SBU) He also reported that "recently" an Adana policeman allegedly had broken the nose of a parishioner selling copies of the New Testament on an Adana street, at a small council-linked kiosk. He said that the parishioner had gone to a state hospital for treatment and received appropriate medical attention, but been denied when he asked for a medical report to document his wounds. (Comment: Without more details, which the contact declined to offer, we cannot confirm this report. End Comment.) Overall, he characterized the atmosphere in the Cukurova region (Adana, Tarsus and Mersin) as "free of harassment and generally improving over the last year." Nevertheless he said that most officials that occasionally question him or parishioners are suspicious of: 1) why Muslims would convert to Christianity; 2) whether their work has foreign ties, which he explained was perceived as explicitly negative; and 3) from whence their funding stemmed.

16. (SBU) A leading Adana protestant church was informed by local Turkish National Police (TNP) on November 21 that unspecified threats against the Christian community in Adana had been received by authorities. The TNP urged church leaders to be cautious during the upcoming Christian holiday period. Christian community leaders expressed reassurance that the TNP constructively had reached out to them and reflected positively that TNP had offered additional protection for their church's neighborhood during December 2003.

Hatay - continuing good story

17. (SBU) In recent PO meetings with Catholic and Eastern Orthodox leaders in the ethnically mixed Hatay province, no major religious freedom issues arose. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox leaders, as well as even Arab ethnic Alawi representatives, offered positive comments about their relationship to the local government, including praising a regular governor-led interfaith council which met several times annually. Both the Hatay governor and the Catholic priest in Antakya (modern site of ancient Antioch and seat of the province government) talked of a Vatican-supported project to develop a new museum for the city's world-famous mosaic collection which also could house a pilgrimage hostel for Christian visitors to the nearby St. Peter's Grotto. Eastern Orthodox leaders in nearby Iskenderun reflected to the PO that they enjoyed a positive relationship with government authorities, although they had concerns about "surprisingly liberal zoning decisions" which recently allowed a non-historic multi-floor parking garage to be erected next door to their main church in the region. Nevertheless, they said that literature, funding and training travel for their clergy (who generally study in Lebanon) was not an issue. They, like Jewish community leaders elsewhere in southeast Turkey, lamented that their community's chief challenge was economic because of high local unemployment and the flight of their youth to Istanbul, western Europe and the U.S.

Mersin - zoning barriers, encroachment, but stable community

8.(SBU) Contacts with Mersin Catholic leaders reflect no significant changes since ref. B reporting. The protestant evangelical community there continues to face zoning challenges to its effort to establish a church, which were it allowed, would be situated in the historical quarter of the city nearby existing Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Many Christian community leaders reflect that considerable stress has been placed on the historically Christian religious district of the city by its location in what has become the upscale center of the city, leading to encroachment on lands caused by first unregulated urbanization and later very conservative zoning backlashes which affect the wider district in an effort to regulate sprawling growth in the area. For now, the protestant evangelical community continues to meet in personal homes and is several hundred strong, although dispersed among several different districts of the city. Overall the Christian community in Mersin is quite wealthy and well-placed in influential city circles. It is stable in size, although there does seem to be a trend of conversion from the Eastern Orthodox to the Catholic church. Security authorities, when confirmed by baptismal records, have allowed identity cards' reference to religion to state "Christian."

9.(SBU) Comment: The situation for the Christian community in southeast Turkey is mixed. Recently two different Christian contacts independently interpreted regional events by noting that Turkish officials reluctantly are tolerating Christian activities "where foreigners are shining a light, but that nothing has changed in the government framework to allow isolated breakthroughs in tolerance to be applied elsewhere." Historic Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian communities, especially in Mersin and Hatay, have struck modus vivendi and seem under little or no pressure, but that pattern has yet to emerge for protestant evangelical communities, which seem to encounter varying levels of official and communal suspicion and resistance. End Comment.

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